

THEOLOGICAL THINKING IN THE ADVENTIST CHURCH

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Resumen

No sólo los expertos se ocupan del pensamiento teológico. Los que no tienen preparación formal en teología bíblica o sistemática están –sin saber– practicando pensamiento teológico cada vez que utilizan e interpretan la Escritura. Es crucial por lo tanto que esta tarea se lleve a cabo de una manera correcta. Este trabajo define en primer lugar la teología y el pensamiento teológico y entonces procede a discutir la naturaleza de la teología adventista y el pensamiento teológico. Si bien enfatiza el papel del pensamiento teológico, también se procede a destacar algunos de los tremendos desafíos de la teología adventista y del pensamiento teológico en relación con los feligreses, así como con los pastores, administradores y teólogos. Finalmente, se efectúan algunas sugerencias en relación con los pasos a seguir por parte del pensamiento teológico adventista y con la forma en que la iglesia, los administradores, pastores y teólogos/eruditos pueden involucrarse en el mismo.

Abstract

Theological thinking is not only undertaken by experts. Those not formally trained in the fields of biblical or systematic theology are unknowingly practicing theological thinking each time they get involved with and interpret Scripture. Therefore, it is crucial that this is done in the right way. The article first defines theology and theological thinking and then goes on to discuss the nature of Adventist theology and theological thinking. While emphasizing the role of theological thinking, some of the tremendous challenges to Adventist theology and theological thinking both with regard to church members as well as with regard to pastors, administrators, and theologians are pointed out. Finally, some suggestions are made as to how Adventist theological thinking could proceed and how the church, administrators, pastors, and theologians/scholars could be involved.

1. INTRODUCTION

In his book *Greek Passion*, Niko Kazantzakis includes a parable that may give us a starting point for our discussion on theological thinking in the Adventist Church. The author uses this parable in order to show that we cannot fully comprehend God.

Once upon a time there was a little village in the desert. All inhabitants of this village were blind. One day a great king with his army passed by. He was riding a huge elephant. The blind had heard many stories about elephants, and they desired to approach the king and touch and investigate his elephant in order to get an idea of what elephants are like. Some of them [...] stepped forward, bowed before the king and asked for permission to touch his elephant. The first blind man grasped his trunk, another one his leg and foot, and a third fellow his flank. One man stretched far and seized his ear, and still another was allowed to ride on the back of the elephant. Delighted they returned to their village. The fellow blind encircled them and eagerly asked them what

kind of being the monstrous animal elephant is. The first one said: “It is an immense hose, and woe to him who will be grabbed by it.” The second one responded: “It is a pillar clothed with skin and hair.” The third said: “It is like a rampart having also skin and hair.” The man, who had seized the ear, replied: “It is not a wall at all but a very thick carpet which moves as soon as one touches it.” And the last one declared: “This is all nonsense. It is a huge mountain which moves.” The four friends laughed. “We are the blind,” said Giannakos. “You are right, forgive me. We wander around His small toe and exclaim: ‘God is as hard as a rock.’ Why? Because we do not get further.”¹

This parable provides some insights into the process of doing theology. It also has limitations, as any example has, and we should not stretch it too far. In any case, there are people who are interested in knowing more about God, His character, and His work. They have heard about the divine being, have reflected upon God, and have already drawn some conclusions. They are involved in theological thinking. As soon as they have the chance to gain more knowledge they use the opportunity. They investigate the “elephant” and share their observations with others.

Which insights does this parable provide?

- ❶ Knowledge about God starts with *revelation*. God has taken and takes the initiative in revealing Himself as well as truths about Himself and about the plan of salvation. He “passes by” where we are.
- ❷ In order to gain knowledge about God and enter into a relationship with Him it is *necessary* to be engaged in the theological enterprise, that is, to look at and study what God has revealed. Theological thinking is not a plight but a privilege and a joy.
- ❸ Thinking theologically means to look at the evidence and *draw conclusions*. The conclusions may be correct or wrong, partially correct, too narrow or too broad. Therefore, a certain tentativeness of one’s own evaluations must be maintained.
- ❹ Thinking theologically requires *humility*. Humans are not infallible. The preamble of the *Seventh-day Adventist 27 Fundamental Beliefs* emphasizes: “Revision of these statements may be expected at a General Conference session when the church is led by the Holy Spirit to a fuller understanding of Bible truth or finds better language in which to express the teachings of God’s Holy Word.”²
- ❺ Theological thinking is an *ongoing process*, which may lead us to an ever-deeper understanding and greater appreciation of God and salvation. This process is never finished and will continue throughout eternity.
- ❻ Theological thinking is *not done alone* and in isolation. It is an activity of a group, namely Christ’s church, and of individuals in the context of and in exchange with the church.

¹ Niko Kazantzakis, *Griechische Passion* (Berlin: Verlag Volk und Welt, 1968), 193-4 (translated).

² *Seventh-day Adventist Church Manual* (rev. ed.; 16th ed.; Hagerstown: Review and Herald Publishing Association, 2000), 9.

- ⑦ Ideally, all believers are involved in the process of doing theology. Although the church has employed specialists, who have been trained in theology, *everyone participates*, and the perspectives of all participants are needed.
- ⑧ The nature of the subject being studied does not allow for a fully comprehensible and exhaustive understanding. Yet, what can be known is *true, even if it is not the whole picture*. The bits and pieces are sufficient to establish a meaningful relationship to God and to be saved.
- ⑨ Different researchers will almost automatically come up with different perspectives. If they start with the same presuppositions and use a common approach, their observations are usually *complementary* instead of contradictory.³
- ⑩ Since theological thinking wrestles with that which transcends our three-dimensional world we have to count on emerging *paradoxes*.⁴

These are helpful insights, but we need to proceed in a more organized manner and raise some other questions. Therefore we will first of all try to define theology and theological thinking. We need to discuss why it is important to be involved in the theological process. Theological challenges for the Adventist church must be spelled out. Furthermore, it may be helpful to briefly outline how to do Adventist Theology. Finally, we have to ask ourselves which roles pastors, administrators, and theologians play in the theological enterprise.

2. DEFINING THEOLOGY

2.1. What is Theology?

The term “theology” is not found in Scripture, but the concept is certainly present. Other terms such as “trinity” are not found either, and yet the Bible teaches that God is triune. The term *theologia* was used in classical Greek. The literal meaning would be “an account of, our discourse about, gods or God,”⁵ “talk about God,”⁶ and therefore also “the doctrine on God.”⁷ Momentarily, we are not concerned with non-Christian theologies and therefore limit ourselves to the Christian use of the term “theology.”

³ Doing theology with the presupposition that God is a living being or the presupposition that God is only a word for a beneficial encounter between human beings will, for instance, lead to totally different results.

⁴ However, even in our world we encounter what could be called paradoxes, for example, when light seems to be waves but also particles.

⁵ David F. Wright, “Theology,” in *New Dictionary of Theology* (ed. Sinclair B. Ferguson and David F. Wright; Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1988), 680.

⁶ T. Gilby, “Theology,” in *Encyclopedic Dictionary of Religion* (ed. Paul Kevin Meagher, Thomas C. O’Brien and Consuelo Maria Aherne; 3 vols.; Washington, D.C.: Corpus Publications, 1979), 3:3497.

⁷ So used by Athanasius and Augustine; cf. Wright, “Theology,” 680.

This term has an extremely wide range of meanings. In *A New Handbook of Christian Theology* the entry “theology” tells us: “See Biblical Theology, Black Theology, Confessional Theology, Death of God Theology, Dogmatic Theology, Empirical Theology, Feminist Theology, Historical Theology, Liberation Theology, Narrative Theology, Natural Theology, Philosophical Theology, Political Theology, Postmodern Theology, Practical Theology, Process Theology, Sacraments/Sacramental Theology, Systematic Theology, Theological Method, Womanist Theology.”⁸ This list is far from being comprehensive, and unfortunately definitions on some of the above-mentioned theologies vary somewhat. Whereas some theologians equate, for instance, dogmatic theology and systematic theology, others do not.

Originally “theology” referred to the doctrine of God in its narrow sense. During the Middle Ages theology was understood as a field of studies and was regarded as a science, even the queen of all sciences.⁹ The claim to be a science is still held today. Therefore, it is argued that the equation of science with natural science only is too narrow.¹⁰ Today theology is often used in the broad sense encompassing “all the disciplines involved in a university course or in training for church ministry.”¹¹

If we move from the broadest usage to the most restricted one the following picture emerges. First level: *Theological studies*. They comprise (1) *biblical studies*, (2) *historical studies*, (3) *practical studies*, and (4) *doctrinal studies*. Basically, theological studies encompass the courses that we offer for a Master of Divinity degree. This is the broadest sense of “theology” in a Christian context. Each of the four subcategories can be further developed. Biblical studies include studies of biblical books and themes and studies of biblical languages. Historical studies can focus upon the history of the Ancient Near East, the history of the Greco-Roman Empire, church history, and the study of archeology. Practical studies include homiletics, Christian counseling, church administration, church growth, evangelism, and mission. Doctrinal studies will be pursued on the next level.

⁸ Donald W. Musser and Joseph L. Price, eds., *A New Handbook of Christian Theology* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1992), 486-7.

⁹ On theology as science and the scientific method applied to theology see, for example, Millard J. Erickson, *Christian Theology* (2nd ed.; Grand Rapids: Baker, 1998), 35-7; and T. C. O'Brien, “Theology as Science” in *Encyclopedic Dictionary of Religion* (ed. Paul Kevin Meagher, Thomas C. O'Brien, and Consuelo Maria Aherne; 3 vols.; Washington, D.C.: Corpus Publications, 1979), 3:3503-4.

¹⁰ Erickson, *Christian Theology*, 36-7. D. S. Adam, “Theology,” in *Encyclopedia of Religion and Ethics* (ed. James Hastings; Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1980), 293, states: “Theology may be briefly defined as the science, which deals, according to the scientific method, with the facts and phenomena of religion and culminates in a comprehensive synthesis or philosophy of religion, which seeks to set forth in a systematic way all that can be known regarding the objective grounds of religious belief [...] Theology is the science which, by right use of reason, in accordance with proper scientific method, correlates, systematizes, and organizes the matter of human religious experiences in such a way as to reach a unified body of coherent doctrine, fitted to satisfy the mind’s demand for truth and to furnish guidance for the practical life.”

¹¹ Wright, “Theology,” 680.

Second level: *Doctrinal studies*. They can be subdivided into (1) *biblical theology*, (2) *historical theology*, (3) *systematic theology*, and (4) *philosophical theology*. Here we have to pause for a moment and explain these different terms.

“Biblical theology in its simplest form is the effort to state what is the theology of the Bible or the theology found within the Bible.”¹² It starts with the theology of a biblical book or author, e.g., the theology of Mark. Which theological emphases can be found in his gospel? How are they developed? What did the author want to express? From the theologies of individual biblical books students of Scripture move toward a theology of the OT and a theology of the NT respectively and finally toward a biblical theology. Biblical theology stays strictly with the biblical text and does not raise issues that are of importance today but are not directly addressed in the Bible. The issue is hotly debated whether or not biblical theology is only descriptive. Some would argue that it is also normative.¹³ Another problem is that in the meantime a great number of scholars suggest that it is impossible to arrive at a biblical theology or even at an OT theology or NT theology. Influenced by their presuppositions and the use of the historical-critical method they claim that the different theologies of biblical authors or the theologies of the sources behind the written documents are so different that they cannot be reconciled and subsumed under a common biblical theology.¹⁴ For them the discrepancies outweigh the similarities.

Historical theology is the study of how certain doctrines were understood during church history. “If New Testament theology is the systematic theology of the first century, then historical theology studies the systematic theologies held and taught by various theologians throughout the history of the church.”¹⁵

Wayne Grudem explains philosophical theology as “studying theological topics largely without use of the Bible, but using the tools and methods of philosophical reasoning and what can be known about God from observing the universe.”¹⁶ Some suggest that philosophy can “supply content for theology” whereas others suggest that it

¹² Patrick D. Miller, “Biblical Theology,” in *A New Handbook of Christian Theology* (ed. Donald W. Musser and Joseph L. Price; Nashville: Abingdon, 1992), 63.

¹³ A distinction has been made between what the text meant to the original audience and what the text means today. There are those who sharply distinguish between these two meanings. For them, biblical theology is descriptive only; Scripture is culturally conditioned and may therefore have nothing or not much to say to a different culture. Others equate what the text meant and what the text means or ignore the issue. See here Richard N. Soulen, *Handbook of Biblical Criticism* (Atlanta: John Knox, 1981), 197-8.

¹⁴ On biblical theology see Erickson, *Christian Theology*, 25-6; Gerhard Hasel, *New Testament Theology: Basic Issues in the Current Debate* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1978); Gerhard Hasel, *Old Testament Theology: Basic Issues in the Current Debate* (4th ed.; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1991); Miller, “Biblical Theology,” 63-9.

¹⁵ Erickson, *Christian Theology*, 27.

¹⁶ Wayne Grudem, *Systematic Theology: An Introduction to Biblical Doctrine* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1994), 21.

can “defend theology or establish its truth” or that it can “scrutinize its concepts and arguments.”¹⁷

Systematic theology has been defined as “any study that answers the question, ‘What does the whole Bible teach us today?’ about any given subject. This definition indicates that systematic theology involves collecting and understanding all the relevant passages in the Bible on various topics and then summarizing their teachings clearly so that we know what to believe about each topic.”¹⁸ Oftentimes there is a close relation between biblical theology and systematic theology. Sometimes an overlap occurs. Ideally systematic theology builds on biblical theology. Its emphasis is on today. Therefore systematic theology does not only discuss all major biblical topics, but also addresses contemporary issues that are not directly, yet through principles, spelled out in Scripture.¹⁹ Many theologies such as liberation theology, process theology, and death of God theology can be regarded as parts or segments of systematic theology. Difference in emphases and results are due to the presuppositions and methods of biblical interpretation used by the respective theologians.

We now turn to the third level of meaning of the term “theology” which gets even narrower: For example, systematic theology can be subdivided in a number of biblical and Christian doctrines, one of them is the doctrine of God, which we call theology in the narrowest sense.

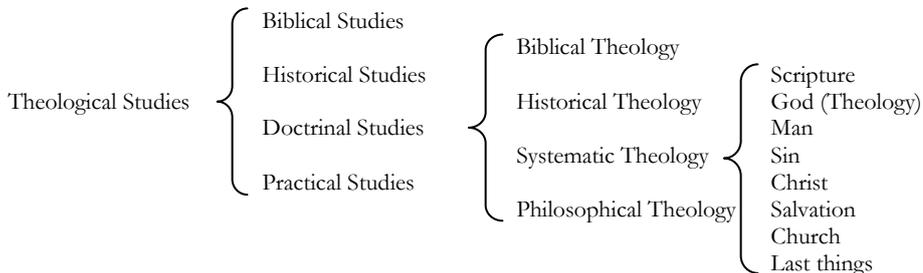


Figure: Divisions and Subjects of Theological Studies

The chart is derived from Millard Erickson pointing to the various senses of theology.²⁰ In this paper we will use the term “theology” in a broader sense referring pri-

¹⁷ Erickson, *Christian Theology*, 29.

¹⁸ Grudem, *Systematic Theology*, 21. Leonard J. Biallas, “Dogmatic Theology,” in *A New Handbook of Christian Theology* (ed. Donald W. Musser and Joseph L. Price; Nashville: Abingdon, 1992), 127-30, distinguishes between dogmatic theology and systematic theology, although oftentimes they are equated, and he argues that systematic theology “uses insights and tools from culture” (128).

¹⁹ For example, how should we relate to psychology, sociology, or the natural sciences? Which choices should we make in the field of music? What about AIDS, abortion, genetic manipulation, chemical dependence, cloning of humans, pornography, euthanasia, etc.?

²⁰ Erickson, *Christian Theology*, 29.

marily to biblical and doctrinal studies in distinction to practical studies, often called applied theology.

2.2. What Is “Theological Thinking”?

Fritz Guy in his book *Thinking Theologically: Adventist Christianity and the Interpretation of Faith* talks about three layers of religious activity and language. The first he calls faith. “*Faith itself* is the first-order religious experience and activity; and it includes the verbal expression of religious experience in the language of prayer and worship....”²¹ The second-order religious activity and language he calls *theology*, which is defined as “the process and expression of thinking about the meaning of faith’s personal experience, practice, and belief—explicating their content, assessing their appropriateness and adequacy, and exploring their implications.”²² The third level of religious activity and language involves the process of doing theology, the philosophy of theology, which he calls *metatheology*. Metatheology describes the “nature, function, sources, and methods of theology.”²³ The *Handbook of Seventh-day Adventist Theology*²⁴ belongs to the second category. It discusses theological content, namely biblical doctrines. Guy’s book belongs to the third level, because it mainly deals with nature, function, and a method of doing theology.

This study is also largely concerned with the third level, metatheology or theological thinking in the Seventh-day Adventist church.

3. THE NATURE OF ADVENTIST THEOLOGY AND THEOLOGICAL THINKING

Erickson summarizes an evangelical approach to theology in five points. They describe at the same time the nature of his theological thinking. “1. Theology is biblical [...]. 2. Theology is systematic [...]. 3. Theology also relates to the issues of general culture and learning [...]. 4. Theology must also be contemporary [...]. 5. Finally, theology is to be practical.”²⁵

²¹ Fritz Guy, *Thinking Theologically: Adventist Christianity and the Interpretation of Faith* (Berrien Springs: Andrews University Press, 1999), 6. For a critique of this work, see, Roy Adams, “In a Time of Confusion,” *Adventist Review* (November 2001): 18-21.

²² Guy, *Thinking Theologically*, 7.

²³ *Ibid.*

²⁴ Raoul Dederen, ed., *Handbook of Seventh-day Adventist Theology* (Hagerstown: Review and Herald Publishing Association, 2000). For critiques of this work see, Richard Rice, “Theology as Topical Bible Study,” *Spectrum* 29 (2001): 61-70; and Roy Adams, “Grappling with Destiny,” *Adventist Review* (April 25, 2002): 24-7.

²⁵ Erickson, *Christian Theology*, 23-4

Probably Adventists would to a large degree agree with Erickson, but it may be necessary to be somewhat more specific. The following theses are suggested with regard to the nature of Adventist theological thinking.²⁶

- ❶ Adventists work with certain presuppositions. These include that God exists, that He has revealed Himself in different ways, especially in Scripture whose authors and writings are inspired by Him. God entered into a communication process, and by believing in Him and getting involved in theological thinking we are responding to His initiative.
- ❷ Adventist theological thinking has a definite goal. It aims at increasing knowledge about God and His work and at establishing and fostering the relationship with the Lord.
- ❸ Adventists acknowledge that the prophets, the apostles, the writers of biblical books, and Jesus Himself were involved in theological thinking. The author of Hebrews tried to help his audience that was in danger of falling away from Christ with heavy theology, solid food and not just milk as he called it (Heb 5:12-6:2). Therefore, theological thinking is regarded as important, and Adventists take Scripture as their example for doing theology.
- ❹ Adventist theology is Bible-oriented and tries to derive its principles of biblical interpretation as well as its method of doing theology from Scripture. Adventist theological thinking accepts Scripture as the primary source for theology. Scripture is the measuring rod or yard stick with which all other sources are evaluated²⁷ such as general revelation and extrabiblical prophecy as well as what Guy calls “three other important kinds of ingredients [which] comprise Adventist theological thinking: historical-theological, cultural-secular, and personal-experiential.”²⁸ Their high view of Scripture allows Adventists to work with the entire canon of the OT and NT and to accept the mutual dependence of both Testaments on each other. Adventists are not ashamed of their unique contributions to Christian doctrines being based upon and taught by Scripture.

²⁶ For further discussion, see, Guy, *Thinking Theologically*, 33-93; and Grudem, *Systematic Theology*, 32-7.

²⁷ Therefore, we cannot agree with the principle *prima scriptura*, as suggested by Guy, *Thinking Theologically*, 137, but uphold *sola scriptura* and *tota scriptura*. The implications become more evident on pages 144 and 146: “Most Christians believe that scripture, as another source of knowledge about reality, offers cognitive content and possibilities of understanding that are not otherwise available. The relationship of this source to the others is again, quite literally, one of complementary, of *completing*. More specifically, the function of scripture is not to provide a short-cut to the knowledge that is also available through the factual-research, creative-artistic, or theoretical-constructive disciplines. Nor is it the function of scripture to judge, correct, or control the knowledge that results from these disciplines [...]. So, in principle, scripture no more competes with the other sources of knowledge about reality than science competes with art or philosophy.”

²⁸ Guy, *Thinking Theologically*, 151.

- ⑤ Adventist theology is Christ-centered. The christological principle is, however, not used in a way that excludes other elements of doctrine as well as lifestyle issues, but the full biblical message is accepted. Yet, all truth must be related to Jesus on whom we are completely dependent for our salvation, sanctification, and glorification.
- ⑥ Adventist theological reflection takes place in the context of the great controversy and includes a strong eschatological emphasis.
- ⑦ Adventist theological thinking comprises description, analysis, and organization of biblical doctrines by drawing on the entire Bible. In this sense theology is systematic. Adventists are not opposed to reasoning, but treasure reason as a gift from God, which needs to be employed. However, human reason is fallible and must be sanctified.²⁹ Although theology attempts “to coalesce the varied teachings into some type of harmonious or coherent whole,”³⁰ the results are always preliminary in so far that they present only a partial picture of reality. This is not to deny that there is absolute truth and that we believe definite statements of belief can be made, but theological thinking must be marked by humility and must be an ongoing process leading believers to deeper insights and a better relationship with God. According to Guy the commitment to truth requires Adventists to reformulate, specify, expand, or correct³¹ doctrinal statements or interpretations of biblical passages if they do not correspond with the biblical testimony. Furthermore, Adventist theological thinking can live with tensions and paradoxes without falling into the trap of choosing one side, when there is no either/or but a both/and.
- ⑧ Adventist theological thinking takes into account contemporary questions and challenges and tries to respond to them. Although culture shapes human beings to a large extent, this does not mean that Scripture is so largely dependent on the ancient culture that the majority of its doctrines and its message are no longer timeless but relative and not directly applicable to our situation. Erickson warns against the dangers of “modernizing Jesus” and “archaizing ourselves.” He writes:
 “The Christian message should address the questions and the challenges encountered today. Yet even here there needs to be cautious about too strong a commitment to a given set of issues. If the present represents a change from the past, then presumably the future will also differ from the present. A theology that identifies too closely with the immediate present (i.e., the ‘today’ and nothing but) will expose itself to premature obsolescence.”³²

²⁹ See Frank M. Hasel, “Theology and the Role of Reason,” *Journal of the Adventist Theological Society* 4.2 (1993): 172-98.

³⁰ Erickson, *Christian Theology*, 23.

³¹ See here, Guy, *Thinking Theologically*, 84-93.

³² Erickson, *Christian Theology*, 24.

- ⑨ Adventist theological thinking is not limited to certain classes or groups. Every believer participates in it. Because it is not done in isolation, correction of false conclusions and stimulation to gain new insights can take place.
- ⑩ Adventist theological thinking is practice-oriented without being pragmatic in the negative sense. The Bible does not separate life from doctrine, nor should we. Theology matters in life and influences life. Poor theology may lead to devastating results in life.³³ “It should be noted, however, that theology must not be concerned primarily with the practical dimensions. The practical effect or application of a doctrine is a consequence of the truth of the doctrine, not the reverse.”³⁴

4. THE ROLE OF THEOLOGICAL THINKING

When we talk about the role of theological thinking, we are asking the question of why it is necessary to think theologically? Richard Rice states: “The commitment to serious Bible study I saw years ago has given way to something rather different in recent years. For the most part, Adventists today are not interested in reading serious books—or even articles—of any length.”³⁵ Some are opposed to theological thinking because it seems to complicate the message and seems to hinder the communication between members of the same church, between Christians of different denominations, and between Christians and non-Christians. It is considered divisive and irrelevant to postmodern humanity.³⁶ Others feel it is dull and boring, too challenging, impractical and far removed from reality.

Why should we think theologically? What is the role of theological thinking? The answers to these questions, given below, show that thinking theologically has to do with God, ourselves, and humanity at large. One author has stated that “theology is inevitable insofar as a Christian (or anyone else) seeks to think coherently and intelligently about God.”³⁷ We may go a step further and say that to a certain degree every Christian is somehow involved in the process of theological thinking. This may be similar to the issue of interpreting biblical texts. Whether we want it or not, we automatically interpret Scripture when reading it and meditating upon it. Therefore the question is not whether or not to get involved in theological thinking, since we are already, but rather, if it is done in the right way, in a consistent manner, and persistently.

³³ Crusades and inquisition are examples of bad Christian theology.

³⁴ Erickson, *Christian Theology*, 24.

³⁵ Rice, “Theology as Topical Bible Study,” 64.

³⁶ See Erickson, *Christian Theology*, 29.

³⁷ Roger E. Olson, *The Story of Christian Theology: Twenty Centuries of Tradition and Reform* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1999), 14.

- ❶ Grudem holds that the basic reason for thinking theologically is the Great Commission which Jesus gave us and in which He charged us to teach “them to observe all that I have commanded you” (Matt 28:19). Jesus’ mandate includes both evangelism and teaching. “And the task of teaching all that Jesus commanded us is, in a broad sense, the task of teaching what the whole Bible says to us today.”³⁸ Donald Bloesch confirms: “It is incumbent upon us to present to the world a reasonably coherent, intelligible gospel, and theological reflection is geared to this end.”³⁹ Thus, thinking theologically is essential because we take seriously the mission to which we have been called.
- ❷ Correct doctrinal beliefs are important for the relationship between God and the believer. “What people believe affects how they live. There can be no vital, dynamic, faithful Christian discipleship completely devoid of theological understanding [...]. A person cannot serve God faithfully without knowing something about God’s nature and will.”⁴⁰ On the other hand, “theology—whether good or bad—is never unimportant. It always produces fruit, good or bad.”⁴¹ And it affects the community around us.
- ❸ “If the community refuses to do its theological thinking, it endangers its own spiritual health and reduces the effectiveness of its witness to the world.”⁴² Theological thinking is beneficial to our lives. Wrong ideas are corrected. We can make better decisions. It helps us to become more mature Christians and to grow intellectually and emotionally. Thus it improves the quality of life.
- ❹ Theological thinking has a dogmatic and an apologetic task. It supports truth and combats error. It alerts the church of threats from without and within. Bloesch mentions universalism and continues to talk about

“...a creeping unitarianism, which calls into question the deity of Christ; situationalism, which denies absolute moral principles; religious naturalism, which discards the idea of a transcendent, theistic God; syncretistic mysticism, which disclaims the historical uniqueness of Jesus Christ; and a secular, political theology which identifies salvation with liberation from economic and political oppression [...]. Against the current mood of social activism in the churches, Evangelical theology will stress the spiritual mission of the church, but not in such a way as to give any support to individualistic, privatistic religion. It will not disavow the social dimension of faith but instead try to see this dimension in its proper context. It will protest against the misconceptions that social re-

³⁸ Grudem, *Systematic Theology*, 27.

³⁹ Donald G. Bloesch, *Essentials of Evangelical Theology: Volume 1: God, Authority, and Salvation* (Peabody: Prince Press, 1998), 18.

⁴⁰ Olson, *Story of Christian Theology*, 16.

⁴¹ Adams, “Grappling with Destiny,” 24. He also mentions September 11, 2001 and bad theology being involved in the attacks on New York City and Washington, D.C.

⁴² Guy, *Thinking Theologically*, 36

form is the mission of the church and the heart of the Christian message is the Sermon on the Mount rather than the atoning sacrifice of Christ on the cross.”⁴³

- ⑤ A Christian and Adventist theology is needed because many alternatives for modern societies are being propagated, such as secularism, new age ideology, and other religions with their respective worldviews. A theology which is reasonable, coherent, and responds to the deepest needs of humankind must be made available.
- ⑥ The church is also in need. It needs the theological insights of all its members.⁴⁴ For the individual it is gratifying to be involved in investigating the truth.
- ⑦ “Theology is necessary because truth and experience are related [...]; in the long run the truth will affect our experience.”⁴⁵ Furthermore, theological thinking is related to practice. Olson suggests that every major Christian doctrine arose for practical reasons and a pressing need.⁴⁶

5. CHALLENGES TO THEOLOGICAL THINKING IN THE ADVENTIST CHURCH

5.1. A Lack of Interest in Theological Issues and Biblical Studies

“In the fourth century [...] Gregory of Nyssa complained that he could not go anywhere or do anything in Constantinople [...] without being engaged by tradespeople in debates over the Trinity [...]. He wrote: ‘If you ask for change, someone philosophizes to you on the Begotten and the Unbegotten. If you ask the price of bread, you are told, ‘The Father is Greater, and the Son is inferior.’ If you ask ‘Is the bath ready?’ someone answers, ‘The Son was created from nothing.’ [...] Beliefs mattered then and they should matter now. [...] Sometimes doctrinal and theological correctness has mattered too much. But if anything, the pendulum has swung to the opposite extreme in our day so that many Christians know little or nothing about Christian doctrines or how they developed or why. Christianity is in danger of becoming little more than a folk religion of therapeutic worship and individual feelings.”⁴⁷

Today there seems to be little interest among Adventist church members in many parts of the world to study theological and biblical issues. A dichotomy is created between life, which is regarded as important, and doctrine, which is seen as impractical. But this is not the NT perspective, which emphasizes the importance of sound doc-

⁴³ Bloesch, *Essentials of Evangelical Theology*, 18-9.

⁴⁴ Gilby, “Theology,” 3:3498, states: “Cajetan was equally prepared to admit that his washerwoman was not only a better believer than himself but also a better theologian.”

⁴⁵ Erickson, *Christian Theology*, 30.

⁴⁶ Olson, *Story of Christian Theology*, 15.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 17.

trine and teaching and does not separate life and theology.⁴⁸ Nevertheless, theology is downplayed in many Adventist circles.⁴⁹ Obviously, most church members are, for instance, content to read Christian novels, biographies, and fiction. Adventist publishing houses largely produce this kind of material. It sells. Intellectually challenging and stimulating books dealing with theology or biblical exposition are produced less frequently.⁵⁰ Attendance during Sabbath School is down. “I am well aware, then,” states Marguerite Shuster, professor at Fuller Theological Seminary “that I am swimming against a powerful tide when I plead for a rebirth of doctrinal preaching. [...] So as soon as people hear that you are pleading for the rebirth of doctrinal preaching, the responses range from anxiety, to terror, to flight.”⁵¹ This phenomenon can also be seen in Adventist congregations.

But the problem is not limited to so-called laypersons. It is very much present among pastors. Many pastors focus almost solely on practical theology. *Ministry* magazine during the last years contained only few articles of a theological nature. Most of the published contributions can be classified as applied theology. Ministerial continuing education emphasizes homiletics, counseling, church growth, and related fields, all of which are important, but not to the exclusion of biblical and theological studies. Although many pastors tend to sign up for courses on applied theology rather than theological classes, what they often need is content not only method.⁵² Conversations with pastors oftentimes show how little theological knowledge they have. There are church members who no longer address biblical questions to their pastors, because they claim that their respective pastor does not know nor is he or she willing to do a little research and try to come up with an answer.

If we look at the curriculum of the programs designed to train pastors, we notice the tendency to add classes of applied theology and to take away classes dealing with theological, OT, and NT studies as well as biblical languages, which are a prerequisite for biblical and theological studies. Quite often our religion departments and Seminaries have to fight for content classes and biblical languages. If we claim the Bible is foundational to what we believe than it needs the proper attention. “As practical as

⁴⁸ See, e.g., the Pastoral Epistles in which the sound “teaching, doctrine” is stressed (1 Tim 1:10; 4:6, 16; 6:3; 2 Tim 3:16; 4:3; Tit 1:9; 2:1, 7).

⁴⁹ Adams, “In a Time of Confusion,” 19, writes: “Every so often, at camp meetings and other gatherings, one can hear demagogic aspersions of theology: ‘We don’t need theology,’ a speaker might say. ‘All we need is Jesus!’ Uttered with passion and conviction, the comment usually brings choruses of amens, if not applause.”

⁵⁰ Adams, “In a Time of Confusion,” 21, states: “We’re into theological pabulum and bedtime stories. ‘That’s what’s selling now,’ they say.” See also Andy Nash, “Serious Bible Study, Anyone? Anyone?” *Adventist Review* (March 5, 1998): 18, who provides some sale figures of Leo Gugliotto’s *Handbook for Bible Study* (1995) which sold 2118 books in 1995 and 527 books in 1997.

⁵¹ “Preaching Christian Doctrine: Derek Morris interviews Marguerite Shuster,” *Ministry* (Jan. 2002): 10.

⁵² See Gernot Facius, “Leise verabschiedet sich die evangelische Kirche von Martin Luther,” *Welt* (Aug. 7, 2001), <http://www.welt.de/daten/2001/08/07/0807de273021.htm?search=evangelische+Kirche&searchHILI=1>.

life itself,” writes Roy Adams, “[theology] is what keeps us from being tomfooled or manipulated by the misguided and the unscrupulous. It forms the bedrock upon which we anchor everything else. Without that foundation we’re completely adrift.”⁵³ For a pastor to be, for example, effective in small group ministries is very desirable, but this does not make him an Adventist pastor. It is the message, which makes all the difference, not techniques and skills. Both need to go together, with the message having priority over against the skills.

Let us take a brief look at the Master of Divinity programs of three American non-Adventist seminaries, two in the liberal tradition and one with a conservative outlook. The M.Div. program of the Chicago Theological Seminary requires two OT, two NT, three theology, two church history, and nine applied theology classes, but no biblical language classes. The mission statement of the Chicago Theological Seminary reveals an emphasis on a social-political and all inclusive-ecumenical agenda even mentioning homophobia, which must be overcome.⁵⁴ Of the 24 half courses necessary to complete the M.Div. at Harvard Divinity School at least twelve must be taken at the Divinity School. The rest may be taken in other schools. Of the twelve Divinity courses three must be taken in the area “Scripture and Interpretation,” six in the area “Christianity and Culture,” and three in “Religions of the World.” Languages are not required, and the study of Scripture is quite limited. Thus, there is a heavy emphasis on comparative religions and little stress on Scripture.⁵⁵ Providence Theological Seminary takes another approach. Their M.Div. requires 93 semester hours. 18 of the 93 credits are devoted to languages and exegesis, another 23 to biblical and theological studies, 33 to Christian ministry and 15 are electives. In their faith commitment the faculty members of Providence Theological Seminary affirm a high view of Scripture, salvation through Jesus, acceptance of the creation account, the importance of eschatology, and the responsibility to proclaim the gospel.⁵⁶ We must decide which route we want to follow. We cannot claim *sola scriptura* and in practice ignore studying Scripture dili-

⁵³ Adams, “In a Time of Confusion,” 20. He continues: “‘All we need is Jesus?’ What is Jesus? Who is Jesus? And why do we need Him, and not the Buddha or Plato or Muhammad or whoever? Without theology, that affirmation, as much as we might agree with it on its face, would have absolutely no content or meaning. The name Jesus, as a reference to a person who lived 2,000 years ago in Palestine, can be appreciated correctly only in a theological context. Without that context, it’s void of any significance.”

⁵⁴ Chicago Theological Seminary, “Mission Statement,” n. p. [cited Oct. 28, 2002]. Online: <http://www.chgosem.edu/mission.html>.

⁵⁵ Harvard Divinity School, “The Master of Divinity Degree,” n. p. [cited Oct. 28, 2002]. Online: <http://www.hds.harvard.edu/afa/mdiv.html>

⁵⁶ Providence College and Seminary, “The Master of Divinity,” n. p. [cited Oct. 28, 2002]. Online: <http://prov.ca/seminary/s-cmdiv.asp?link=prov.ca-text>.

gently. We also have to ask ourselves why recently a number of pastors have left the Adventist Church and are attacking the message of this church.⁵⁷

Thus, there is also an administrative side to the problem, and it seems to be the case that a good number of administrators and departmental leaders are not very interested in theological thinking either. While they promote the mission of the church, they may neglect reflection on the message of the church and leave this task to the professional theologians. But theological thinking must be an enterprise of the entire church.

What are the reasons that theological thinking is neglected by so many? For a number of reasons our contemporary western culture is largely hostile or indifferent to theological thinking, and its worldview infiltrates and has already reached the church. Peter Schmiechen lists several reasons to which we have added some more:⁵⁸

- ① *Individualism*. It stresses that the experience and the well being of the individual are important, not those of a group. Theological thinking, if done at all, becomes a private matter. Although the Bible emphasizes the importance of the individual, it balances this perspective by also stressing the corporate aspect.⁵⁹
- ② *Functionalism*. “[...] religion must do something for me!” Functionalism is “the triumph of doing over being.”⁶⁰ It may be closely related to pragmatism. Although religion should do something for ordinary people, the desire to benefit from one’s faith is not the best approach. It makes a great difference if one marries in order to benefit the partner or if one marries in order to benefit from the spouse. The first approach will automatically bring along blessings for those, who use it.

⁵⁷ Samuele Bacchiocchi “End Time Issues 75,” (E-mail newsletter; October 2001), states: “The number of pastors and members who have recently left the Adventist Church raises some serious questions about the theological training of our ministers. Reading their literary attacks against the Sabbath clearly reveals a faulty method of Biblical interpretation. Their arbitrary use of few selected Bible texts to support their conclusions shows that they have never been taught how to examine all the relevant passages, before jumping to conclusions. Part of the problem may be deficient seminary training on the proper method of Biblical interpretation and on the doctrinal foundations of our faith. In recent years the tendency the pressure [sic] on our Theological Seminary has been to focus more on the practical aspects of the ministry such as church growth, and less on doctrinal, exegetical, and historical studies. This shift may account for the fact that some of our pastors seem to be confused on our fundamental doctrines.”

⁵⁸ Peter Schmiechen, *Christ the Reconciler: A Theology for Opposites, Differences, and Enemies* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1996), 1-32.

⁵⁹ See here also Gerald A. Klingbeil, “Entre individualismo y colectivismo: hacia una perspectiva bíblica de la naturaleza de la iglesia,” in *Pensar la iglesia hoy: hacia una eclesiología adventista. Estudios teológicos presentados durante el IV Simposio Bíblico-Teológico Sudamericano en honor a Raoul Dederen* (ed. Gerald A. Klingbeil et al.; Libertador San Martín, Argentina: Editorial Universidad Adventista del Plata, 2002), 3-22.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, 7-8.

- ③ *Autonomy*. Religion is a matter of free choice by an individual. But this includes also freedom from government, family, authority, sacred texts,⁶¹ and therefore, for many, also freedom from thinking theologically.
- ④ *Consumerism*. “In other centuries, human beings wanted to be saved, or improved, or freed, or educated. But in our century, they want to be entertained. The great fear is not of disease or death, but boredom.”⁶² The self-centeredness of humanity “holds the potential of changing the gospel from a call to hear God’s will to an appeal to the listeners’ needs and interests.”⁶³
- ⑤ *Sociological approach*. The theological language has been replaced by social-political language and a respective method.⁶⁴
- ⑥ *Pluralism*. “Where theology descends into the polyphony of contending voices and slogans, churches turn to political and economic means to resolve disagreement.” But “the political model has only fractured the church.”⁶⁵
- ⑦ *Relativism and emotionalism*. “A majority of Americans base their beliefs and moral decisions on feelings and reject the idea of absolute truth [...]” The research shows that “only one in 10 ‘born-again’ teenagers accepted the idea of absolute moral truth.”⁶⁶ Why should one make the effort to think theologically if there is no truth anyway and if everything is relative?
- ⑧ *Elitism and apathy*.⁶⁷ Whereas a part of the church, especially theologians, are involved in theological thinking, the rest of the church oftentimes remains uninvolved and falls into apathy, because it does not feel sufficiently qualified and trained to do theology. It is neither appropriate to exclude people from the theological enterprise by letting them know and feel that they are unqualified nor is it right to use the argument of not having received specific training as an excuse from getting involved in theological thinking.
- ⑨ Theological thinking may be considered *too difficult, too boring, and too time-consuming*.

5.2. New Approaches to Adventist Theology

Whereas many Adventists are not interested in theological thinking, others are, and they arrive at conclusions different from the worldwide Adventist church. This is true for a number of our theologians and pastors, but also for lay members. In addition,

⁶¹ Schmiechen, *Christ the Reconciler*, 11-2.

⁶² Michael Crichton, *Timeline* (New York: Alfred A Knopf, 1999), 400-1.

⁶³ Schmiechen, *Christ the Reconciler*, 14.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, 15.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, 54-5.

⁶⁶ *Adventist News Network Bulletin*, March 19, 2002.

⁶⁷ Guy, *Thinking Theologically*, 33.

the pastoral ministry of the church may at times fail to address certain subjects and may eliminate these subjects from preaching and teaching. As a result, a gap is left, which sometimes is filled by theological views of certain independent ministries. When we, for instance, neglect to give proper attention to eschatology, others will fill the void in a way that we cannot support and do not want. Some of the new approaches and interpretations start with the same presuppositions for doing theology that the Adventist church uses and arrive at different conclusions. However, many employ a different set of presuppositions.

Different presuppositions will automatically lead to different results. In case we would opt for some of the presuppositions of the historical-critical method, we would end up with an Adventist theology quite different from the current 27 Fundamental Beliefs. Such an approach normally claims that biblical texts have evolved over longer periods of time, and that the authors being mentioned in Scripture have not written these books. Instead, respective biblical books would consist of a number of sources and many small units. The theology of biblical documents would have been shaped by the major authors or editors to such an extent that, for example, Luke's theology would be quite different from Jesus' theology. Furthermore, predictive prophecy would have to be rejected. We would not know about the origin of the Sabbath, and the creation account could not be taken literally. Resurrection of the dead would be primarily a spiritual resurrection here and now.⁶⁸

There are, for instance, among us different views on how to understand divine revelation and inspiration. In some cases the human element of Scripture is stressed to an extent that the divine becomes secondary or is completely omitted. Contradictions and discrepancies are seen in many places of Scripture, and it is claimed that they should not be harmonized. According to this view, the Bible contains many errors and becomes a mere casebook.⁶⁹

⁶⁸ For further discussion and references, see, Ekkehardt Müller, "Hermeneutik - Geschichte und Methoden" (unpublished paper, Predigertagung der Baden-Württembergischen Vereinigung der Siebenten-Tags Adventisten, Freudenstadt, March 1999). In an unpublished paper on the moderate use of the historical-critical method Angel Rodriguez has shown that whether you use the method completely or in a moderate way, you basically arrive at the same conclusions (see "The Use of the Modified Version of the Historical-Critical Approach by Adventist Scholars" [Predigertagung des Süddeutschen Verbands, Marienhöhe, Darmstadt, July 1999]).

⁶⁹ Cf. Richard W. Coffin, "A Fresh Look at the Dynamics of Inspiration: Part 2," *Ministry* (Feb. 2000): 20-3; Alden Thompson, *Inspiration: Hard Questions, Honest Answers* (Hagerstown: Review and Herald Publishing Association, 1991); and the responses by Frank Holbrook und Leo Van Dolson, eds., *Issues in Revelation and Inspiration* (Adventist Theological Society Occasional Papers 1; Berrien Springs: Adventist Theological Society Publications, 1992); Samuel Koranteng-Pipim, *Receiving the Word: How New Approaches to the Bible Impact Our Biblical Faith and Lifestyle* (Berrien Springs: Berean Books, 1996), and Ekkehardt Müller, "The Revelation, Inspiration, and Authority of Scripture," *Ministry* (April 2000): 21-5. See also the discussion in *Ministry*, March 1999, and *Spes Christiana*, volumes 7-8, 1996-1997.

Drawing a sharp distinction between what the Bible meant and what it means may lead to a strong emphasis on the so-called culture-conditioned nature of Scripture. It would follow that large parts of the Bible are not directly relevant today and that they must be reinterpreted. We may call this the cultural-relativistic paradigm. Rolf Pöhler states:

As nothing in this world can escape the relativity of time and place, doctrinal conceptualizations and formulations necessarily reflect a particular historical situation and cultural context. Thus, there can be no timeless and permanent doctrinal meaning, nor any immutable conceptual truth. In an open and progressive world, meaning must constantly be discovered anew from the perspective of one's own culture and worldview. This requires the constant reinterpretation of doctrines and their creative translation into the thought forms and idioms of contemporary humanity. At times, this may even involve a radical reorientation and revision of doctrinal beliefs.⁷⁰

When the *sola scriptura* principle is given up, in practice it follows that “doctrines arise, not from the Bible alone, but from the dynamic interplay between the Bible and the living experience of the church.”⁷¹ Thus, Christian experience and tradition become an important source for formulating doctrines.

When we follow the axioms of postmodernism, we have to espouse pluralism and give up any notion of absolute truth.⁷² This would also mean to give up any hope that the Adventist Church can maintain unity in theology, that is, unity in its message. “To put it bluntly,” Guy says, “because the world comprises a diversity of cultural contexts, the idea of one completely homogenous, internationally identical Adventist theology is not plausible.”⁷³ He goes on to describe an Adventist theology for North America:

A contextualized Adventist theology in twenty-first-century North America must be scientifically and historically informed, socially and culturally aware, and spiritually and intellectually vigorous. In general terms, it should have the following characteristics: It should be *broadly focused* . . . It should be *imaginative*, recognizing not only the legitimacy but also the desirability of exploring new understandings and applications of scripture, and regarding multiple interpretations as potentially complementary rather than contradictory. It should be *modest* [...]. It should be *ecumenical* [...].⁷⁴

And Reinder Bruinsma insists:

⁷⁰ Rolf Pöhler, “Change in Seventh-day Adventist Theology: A Study of the Problem of Doctrinal Development” (Th.D. Diss.; Andrews University, 1995), 99. For a critique, see, Winfried Vogel, “A Case of Revisionism: A Critique of Rolf J. Pöhler, ‘Change in Seventh-day Adventist Theology: A Study of the Problem of Doctrinal Development’” (unpublished paper, 1996).

⁷¹ Richard Rice, *Reason and the Contours of Faith* (Riverside: LaSierra University Press, 1991), 90.

⁷² For a discussion, see, Winfried Vogel, “Man and Knowledge: The Search for Truth in a Pluralistic Age” *JATS* 7.2 (1996): 180-218, and Douglas Groothuis, “The Postmodernist Challenge to Theology,” *Them* 25 (1999): 4-22.

⁷³ Guy, *Thinking Theologically*, 233.

The rapidly growing church is still remarkably [sic] united, both organizationally and theologically, but it manifests an increasing pluralism. Unfortunately, this seems to lead to a significant degree of polarization. Where one current seeks to find ways of making Adventism more relevant to this generation, others insist that 'the old landmarks' of the Adventist faith must be zealously guarded and are unwilling to re-think or modify traditional views. These more conservative Adventists insist that Adventism must continue to subscribe to its traditional interpretations of prophecy, with the corresponding condemnation of Roman Catholicism and other Christian churches. The more 'progressively' inclined are increasingly open to emphasizing the common bond with other Christians and tend to feel uncomfortable with traditional attitudes."⁷⁵

Today many doctrines of the Adventist Church are questioned from within such as creation, salvation, the Sabbath, the sanctuary, the remnant, the role of Ellen G. White. The doctrine of the Trinity is challenged.⁷⁶ The open view of God or process theology is proposed.⁷⁷ We hear about the new covenant theology,⁷⁸ the moral influence theory,⁷⁹ universal legal justification in Christ,⁸⁰ divergent interpretations of Daniel and Revelation⁸¹ and many other developments. Is Adventism going to be theologically fragmented, to allude to the title of Johnsson's book?⁸²

5.3. Summary of the Trends Inside the Church and Their Consequences

In a paper presented to the board of the Ellen White Estate Miroslav Kiš points to four trends and challenges for the Adventist Church:⁸³

⁷⁴ Ibid., 235-6.

⁷⁵ Reinder Bruinsma, *Seventh-day Adventist Attitudes Toward Roman Catholicism 1844-1965* (Berrien Springs: Andrews University Press, 1994), 301.

⁷⁶ Compare, Keith Burton, "The Trinitarian Compromise: Seventh-day Adventist Doctrine and Public Relations" (unpublished paper, Adventist Society of Religious Studies, Denver, Nov. 2001).

⁷⁷ See, Richard Rice, *The Openness of God: The Relationship of Divine Foreknowledge and Human Free Will* (Nashville: Review and Herald Publishing Association, 1980).

⁷⁸ Dale Ratzlaff, *Sabbath in Crisis* (Applegate: Life Assurance Ministries, 1990), who builds on D. M. Canright, *Seventh-Day Adventism Renounced* (Nashville: B. C. Goodpasture, 1948).

⁷⁹ Jack Provonsa, *You Can Go Home Again: An "Untheology" of the Atonement* (Washington, D.C.: Review and Herald Publishing Association, 1982), 94; Charles Scriven, "God's Justice, Yes; Penal Substitution, No," *Spectrum* 23 (Oct. 1993): 31-8; and a reaction against it by George Reid, "Why Did Jesus Die? How God Saves Us" (see <http://biblicalresearch.gc.adventist.org>).

⁸⁰ See, Robert J. Wieland and Donald K. Short, *1888 Re-Examined* (Meadow Vista: The 1888 Message Study Committee, 1987; Jack Sequeira, *Beyond Belief: The Promise, the Power, and the Reality of the Everlasting Gospel* (Boise: Pacific Press, 1993).

⁸¹ See, Samuele Bacchiocchi, "Endtime Issues No. 86" (E-mail newsletter; July 2002).

⁸² Compare here, William G. Johnsson, *The Fragmenting of Adventism* (Boise: Pacific Press, 1995).

⁸³ Miroslav Kiš, "God's Prophetic Ministry Through E. G. White: Vision and Agenda" (unpublished paper; Board of Ellen G. White Estate, Jan. 2002), 3-7.

Challenge #1. For several years now, the business model has influenced ministerial work and programs. Books and articles within conservative churches speak about the Gospel in terms of a ‘product’ which needs only to be “marketed” in a skillful manner. [...] some Seminaries have revised their curricula where *skill* training is emphasized at the expense of Biblical, theological, and historical knowledge. [...] Ministers learn well the ‘how to’ of preaching, with very limited, or non-existent courses which will tell them what to say.

Challenge #2. Christian education in general faces a temptation to minimize its Christian character. “The loss of theological thinking in the pews as well as in the pulpit, could best be explained [...] by the way in which modernity refocuses our interests, displacing the moral by the therapeutic, the divine by the human, truth by intuition, and conviction by technique. As a result we have not only secular humanism in our society but also secular evangelicalism.”⁸⁴ Some think we might be in danger of having secular Adventism as well.

Challenge #3. [...] we hear about such things as the dichotomy between law and love, priority of relationships over rules, the preference of values over virtues, and about the greatness of the divine unconditional pardon of sins. As innocent as these may sound, a closer scrutiny will uncover some troubling connotations.

Challenge #4. Another current idea [...] is that in the Bible we find only general principles, and that rules of behavior are left to our own judgment under the Spirit’s guidance.

What are the consequences of the present theological situation of the Adventist church? We are in danger of loosing our message and thereby also our identity, which will to a large degree affect the unity of the church. We are in danger of promoting and teaching illness rather than health. We are in danger of loosing our distinctive trait of being the people of the Book and thereby the people of the Lord, because the Lord is primarily revealed through the Book. We are in danger of being driven by sociology, psychology, missiology,⁸⁵ and other forces instead of sound biblical theology. We are in danger of submitting to the pressure of being politically correct even when it militates against Scripture and of making decisions without thorough theological reflection. Theology matters. Theology will influence the world church in various ways and will either hinder or foster its unity and mission.

⁸⁴ David F. Wells, *Losing our Virtue* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998), 4.

⁸⁵ See, for example, Ebbie C. Smith, “An Evangelical Approach to the Theology of Religions,” *SwJT* 44 (2002): 6-23; Jim Sibley, “Christianity Vis-à-vis Judaism,” *SwJT* 44 (2002): 24-43; Samuel Shadid, “Christianity Vis-à-vis Islam,” *SwJT* 44 (2002): 61-74.

6. TOWARD AN ADVENTIST THEOLOGY

Erickson suggests ten steps for the process of doing theology:⁸⁶ Gerhard Hasel has made proposals for working toward an OT and NT theology.⁸⁷ Our suggestion would be to start out with the selection of a hermeneutical method, which is true to Scripture's self-testimony and does not superimpose foreign categories and tools on Scripture. Theology is more than exegesis, but must be supported by a proper exegesis.⁸⁸ Exegesis forms the backbone for biblical theology. A constant dialogue between biblical theology and exegesis must take place. Finally, we move from biblical theology to systematic theology.

This process of doing theology includes investigating all relevant passages in Scripture that deal with a certain topic, studying their literary and historical contexts, analyzing the crucial verses, sentences, and words, trying to find categories that summarize data in subheadings, getting informed about former work done on the respective topic and sources that may further illuminate it, incorporating the topic, which is studied, into and relating it to the overall message of Scripture, and finally showing its relevance for our present situation and expressing it in words and concepts that are understandable and can be shared easily with the current generation. Guy has mentioned a number of fallacies that must also be avoided.⁸⁹

It is our persuasion that even systematic theology must be a discipline thoroughly grounded in Scripture. It must relate to the other biblical disciplines, must be organized, and must apply to life. It must be approached with prayer and humility.

7. THE ROLE OF THE CHURCH, ITS ADMINISTRATORS, PASTORS, AND THEOLOGIAN IN THE THEOLOGICAL ENTERPRISE

We have noted that theology is essential to the health and growth of the church. Authors of the NT used even profound theology in order to help their churches. This

⁸⁶ Erickson, *Christian Theology*, 70-83 suggests the following steps: (1) Collection of the Biblical Materials; (2) Unification of the Biblical Materials; (3) Analysis of the Meaning of Biblical Teachings; (4) Examination of Historical Treatments; (5) Consultation of Other Cultural Perspectives; (6) Identification of the Essence of the Doctrine; (7) Illumination from Extrabiblical Sources; (8) Contemporary Expression of the Doctrine; (9) Development of a Central Interpretive Motif; (10) Stratification of the Topics.

⁸⁷ Hasel, *Old Testament Theology*, 194-208; idem, *New Testament Theology*, 204-20.

⁸⁸ For an explanation of the exegetical task and its procedures, see, Ekkehardt Müller, "Guidelines for the Interpretation of Scripture" (unpublished manuscript; BRICOM meeting, Berrien Springs, Michigan, May 2002), and Gerhard Pfandl, *The Authority and Interpretation of Scripture* (Wahroonga, Australia: South Pacific Division of Seventh-day Adventists, n. d.).

⁸⁹ Guy, *Thinking Theologically*, 107-16.

can be clearly seen in the Epistle to the Hebrews. The Letter to the Romans is also more a theological treatise than an actual letter.

The role of the church would be to recognize that all church members are asked to get involved in theological thinking in one way or the other, to articulate that insight, and take steps to make it a reality. We have already mentioned the institution of the Sabbath School which could be used in a better way and which must be promoted. Sabbath School, however, is not only a teaching experience, but should allow church members to get actively involved. Pastors may want to think about how the theological dialogue can be made more meaningful. We all may have to learn to share our insights on biblical texts and topics and theological issues, especially, on Sabbath afternoons. Instead of talking about irrelevant themes, we could have meaningful discussions.

Pastors are asked to get more involved in theological studies and learn to enjoy the beauty of the biblical message. They must take time to study in order to present—when preaching—a “healthy meal” and not only a splendid form without much content. They need to grow personally in their understanding of God, his will, and his plan of salvation. To a large degree, pastors are responsible for the climate in their churches. This includes theological understanding and a love for God’s Word. Question and answer periods on Sabbath afternoons, Friday evenings, or at a church retreat, at which church members and guests are allowed to ask any biblical question can be very enriching.⁹⁰ Seminars on biblical subjects and theological questions can be offered to church members. Pastors can come up with creative ideas that help the church to focus on the Word and become united theologically.

Professional theologians have received special training. They are the ones to point to important issues and developments that need to be addressed and studied. They are resource persons to their students, pastors, and administrators. They wrestle with current issues and difficult questions. They teach and write. However, they have to watch out not to become specialists sitting in ivory towers whose work is irrelevant to the message and mission of the church.

Administrators are asked to participate in the theological thinking of the church. Although they are involved in other areas of ministry, they constantly have to return to the foundation, be filled with the Word of God, and take care of their relationship to the Lord, which includes growth in knowledge of the Lord and his work. Administrators are facilitators, and they set the tone of what is to happen within the church. They help pastors to develop a balanced ministry and churches to grow in all aspects. They may organize specific meetings for pastors—maybe even on a regular basis—in which only theological issues and biblical texts and topics will be discussed. They

⁹⁰ Pastors do not need to be afraid of the questions. It is natural that we cannot answer all questions that may come up right away. We can admit that, take the question home, study, and come up with an answer next time. Furthermore, it is not only the pastor that is supposed to answer questions. Each church member may contribute during the question and answer period.

should seek to work together with theologians of the church. They may see to it that publications for employees and so-called laypersons deal with theology and stimulate theological thinking. They need to be intentional about fostering the theological unity of the church and preserving the message of the church. They may create a think pool, which studies ways to improve the theological unity among us. They may introduce a biblical or doctrinal element in the board meetings and here and there devote additional time for extensive wrestling with the biblical text. Caution must be exercised when hiring pastors or teachers. Furthermore administrators must be willing to make unpopular decisions, for instance, when it becomes necessary to lay off personnel. There is still a hunger for good and solid theology in many quarters of the world church. Our people can still get enthusiastic about the Bible and, ultimately, our Lord, but we must help them.

8. CONCLUSION

We do not have ready-made solutions for the theological problems and challenges that the Adventist church faces, and this cannot be expected either. But something needs to be done. Some serious study and some serious praying must happen. It is excellent that we stress unity as one of the most important goals of the Adventist church. But administrative unity and unity in mission is not sufficient. We need another ingredient. We need unity in the message of the church. That does not mean that we have a prescribed interpretation for all biblical texts, but that we agree in the 27 Fundamental Beliefs and other essential interpretations of Scripture. If this crucial element is missing, I fear, sooner or later our administrative system and our mission endeavor will not and cannot hold us together any longer.

“If we decide that we do not have time to stop and think about right and wrong, then we do not have time to figure out right from wrong, which means that we do not have time to live according to our model of right and wrong, which means, simply put, that we do not have time for lives of integrity.”⁹¹

⁹¹ Stephen L. Carter, *Integrity* (New York: HarperCollins, 1997), 27.